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'The stories of our lives': Prep school alumni hear echoes in assault claim

Joe Heim, The Washington Post Published 5:06 pm PDT, Wednesday, September 19, 2018

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In this photo taken Jan. 17, 2016, Katerina Maylock, with Capitals Educators, teaches a college test preparation class at Holton Arms School in Bethesda.



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WASHINGTON - Bettina Lanyi remembers. It was 1986, and she was in eighth grade. She and a friend went to a house in Washington's Tenleytown neighborhood packed with high school kids, including a throng of boys from Gonzaga College High School and Georgetown Preparatory School. There was a lot of beer. A few fights broke out. Lanyi recalls being pawed and kissed. It freaked her out. She hadn't been drinking, but her friend, also an eighth-grader, had.

Lanyi turned around to see a large freshman from one of the schools lying on top of her friend. Lanyi, then a petite 13-year-old, shoved the boy and kicked him. The boy was surprised and appealed to Lanyi to let him continue. "I'll never get her number otherwise," he told her. She took her friend and left.

Lanyi has thought about that night often since Sunday, when Christine Blasey Ford publicly accused Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh of sexually assaulting her when she was a 15-year-old student at Holton-Arms School and he was a 17-year-old student at Georgetown Prep. She has thought about stories of male entitlement and drunken sexual assault she heard from classmates while she was a student at Prep's Bethesda neighbor, Stone Ridge of the Sacred Heart, and the many more stories she has heard in the years since their graduation.

"There was a lot of shame and stigma then if a girl was raped, so girls tried to hide it. They didn't tell anyone," Lanyi said. "The term 'date rape' wasn't something that even existed then. So if it happened, it was always kind of the girl's fault."

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Lanyi's recollection of a private school culture suffused by alcohol and drugs - and frequent if unreported sexual assault or misbehavior - is widely shared by students who attended those schools in the 1980s. It was, they recalled, an era marked by excess and illegality that went widely unchecked by parents and school leaders who were unaware or uninterested in cracking down on the behavior.

On Tuesday, Lanyi helped launch an online letter of support for Ford from women and men who grew up in the upper Northwest Washington neighborhoods and Maryland suburbs that fed into the exclusive private schools and country clubs during the same era that Ford and Kavanaugh attended their schools.

The letter's message to Ford is unambiguous: "We believe you. Each one of us heard your story and not one of us was surprised. These are the stories of our lives and our friends' lives."



More than 300 people signed the letter, including graduates of Stone Ridge, Georgetown Prep, Georgetown Visitation Preparatory School, Gonzaga and many others.

A similar letter of support for Ford from Holton-Arms graduates bore 925 signatures Wednesday, including from actress Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Class of 1979.

The letters came in response to a missive Friday signed by 65 women supporting Kavanaugh after the assault allegations emerged but before Ford came forward.

"We are women who have known Brett Kavanaugh for more than 35 years and knew him while he attended high school between 1979 and 1983. For the entire time we have known Brett Kavanaugh, he has behaved honorably and treated women with respect," read the letter, from women who attended schools including Visitation, Stone Ridge and Holton-Arms.

This story is based on interviews with two dozen former students, many of whom asked not to be identified because of how tightly knit and powerful the alumni from those schools are, and because they fear retribution or harassment for speaking out on the allegations engulfing Kavanaugh's nomination.

They described parties with kegs of beer and bottles of liquor, grain punch, heavy drinking and drug use that took place almost every weekend and even on weeknights in private homes, parks, open fields and golf courses in Maryland and Washington. Until 1986, the drinking age in Washington was 18, and alcohol was easily accessible. Drugs, especially cocaine and quaaludes, were plentiful.

Women who attended those parties remember sexually aggressive behavior by some of the male students that often bordered or

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into a bedroom, but that . . . happened to girls all the time."

Another woman who did not want to be identified said what she witnessed and what happened to her friends left her scarred three decades later.

"It was just a horrible culture," she said. "I never married, I don't have kids, and I trace it all back to those parties."

All of the women interviewed for this story took pains to point out that not all of the students at the all-boys schools took part in this culture. But the problem was widespread and toxic, they said.

"There were lots of teenage boys I knew at Prep and Gonzaga who were not sexually assaulting girls, but they were in an environment where that was seen as acceptable," said a woman who attended Stone Ridge in the late 1980s and is a member of the Blessed Sacrament Roman Catholic parish in Washington, the same church Kavanaugh attends. "The story that Dr. Ford told, that doesn't surprise me at all."

Women also recounted threats and verbal assault and demeaning behavior and comments.

A 1980 Visitation graduate recalls politely asking a Georgetown Prep football player and his friends to leave a party that had ended at her friend's house. The boys didn't want to go and said so, asking the woman how she was going to make them leave. One took a step in her direction. She cracked the Heineken bottle from which she had been drinking against the wall and pointed the jagged edge at him. The boy walked away, muttering obscenities. They weren't friends before, and certainly not after. The woman watched as the man steadily became a pillar of society. She doubts he remembers.

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"When alcohol was involved, it always got worse," said a woman who attended Stone Ridge in the 1980s and asked not to be identified. "The boys were really unable to regard young women as intellectual, social equals, and it was really infuriating to me. It's so jarring to feel like you're a competent, confident person, and then boys can't treat you like a human."

In July, more than 150 Georgetown Prep graduates wrote a letter of support that extolled Kavanaugh as a friend and leader, saying, in part, "We unite in our common belief that Judge Brett M. Kavanaugh is a good man, a brilliant jurist, and is eminently qualified to serve as an Associate Justice on the U.S. Supreme Court."

Several Georgetown Prep graduates interviewed for this story who attended during the 1980s say they have fond memories of the school and the lifetime friendships they forged there. But they also corroborate the impression that alcohol was an integral part of the school's identity at the time and that heavy drinking and disregard or mistreatment of women were widely accepted.

"Drinking was part of the fabric of the school from the first day of freshman year to graduation," said Bill Barbot, who graduated from Georgetown Prep in 1986 and overlapped with Kavanaugh and with Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch. He went on to play guitar for the critically acclaimed indie punk band Jawbox and heads a digital marketing agency in Washington.

Barbot said he never witnessed any of his schoolmates take advantage of a drunk girl, but he remembers that many students at the all-boys school did not have healthy relationships with their counterparts from all-girls schools, particularly at parties.

"A lot of us didn't really have a proper education in how to manage yourself in situations that were complicated to manage as a teenager, but incredibly complicated to manage as an inebriated teenager," Barbot said. "That is in no way an excuse for anyone to act inappropriate or violently, but it's the truth about the school then."

Terrance MacMullan, a 1990 graduate of Georgetown Prep who is a philosophy professor at Eastern Washington University,

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On Tuesday, MacMullan signed the letter of support for Ford. He said he has no idea whether Kavanaugh sexually assaulted Ford, but "my inclination is to assume the accuser is speaking in good faith."

"I'm really sad this is being associated with my school, but I'm furious and heartbroken that this happened to this woman and that's she's having to go through this all over again," MacMullan said.

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